

Rosemary Tonks, *Bedouin of the London Evening: Collected Poems*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2014. 160pp. £12

Rosemary Tonks died in 2014, more than thirty years after she had renounced an ascending literary career. The obituaries came like an avalanche: the recluse had been found, and what a story she'd been hoarding. Born in 1928 in the English county of Kent, Tonks had a troubled girlhood. Her father died of Blackwater fever in Nigeria before she was born, and as a child she was shuffled between schools and children's homes. Though afflicted with eye trouble, she was an avid reader and writer from a young age: her first story was broadcast on the BBC while she was still in school. In 1949, at the age of twenty, she married Michael Lightband, an engineer who took her to India and Pakistan for his work. In Calcutta she suffered from paratyphoid fever, and in Karachi she contracted polio, which left her with a disability. After a year alone in Paris in 1952–1953, Tonks moved with Lightband to London and launched her literary career. In the 1960s she published two books of poetry, *Notes on Cafés and Bedrooms* (1963) and *Iliad of Broken Sentences* (1967); she also penned six novels, many short stories, and some pointed reviews. The end of the 1960s marked a turning point in Tonks's life: her mother died, her marriage ended, and she embarked upon a journey through the major (and not so major) world religions, ending up at a fundamentalist Christianity that left the Bible, particularly the New Testament, the only text in her life. In the late 1970s she left London and stopped publishing, and by 1981 she had undergone a "second birth," renouncing both her work and her former life as a writer. Her poetry fell out of print, as she wished. In an act that she called "the burning of some idols," Tonks destroyed her final unfinished novel and a priceless collection of "Oriental treasures" inherited from an aunt. From then until her death, Tonks lived a solitary though not entirely reclusive existence in a small house in Bournemouth.

As a poet, Tonks was what we might call a hater. Neil Astley, in his introduction to this posthumous collected poems, sums up the Tonks oeuvre this way: "The poems are full of damning judgments, insults, extremes, resentments, betrayals and irreconcilable opposites." Beyond the raw expression of spleen, Tonks managed a peculiar dialectic, best described as fog/mud. Opposite elements that each veil or conceal, both fog and mud seem at once inanimate and not. The best parts of Tonks's poems are those moments when the fog/mud dialectic swings into operation, and images at once livid and obscure startle you from the page: "Their muzzles giving verbals of hot milk" ("Ace of Hooligans"); "And the morning's alcoholic as a lily" ("Bedouin of the London Morning"); "An ultra-treacherous idea was in its private room there" ("April and the Ideas-Merchant"); "In my brain's

clear retina / I have the stolen love-behaviour” (“Badly-chosen Lover”); or the incredible opening to her second book, *Iliad of Broken Sentences*: “I have lived it, and lived it, / My nervous, luxury civilization, / My sugar-loving nerves have battered me to pieces.” The sense of endurance, of idle waiting through tremendous boredom, is belied by the pizzazz of objects like “sugar-loving nerves.” (Elsewhere, worms, squid, meatporters, and humus also speckle her verse.) Tonks’s interest in objects was matched only by her delight in deliquescence. She liked grease, sweat, dusk, old mattresses. Her poems feel coated in something not very pleasant—“An apricot fabric, hanging in wads lightly grimed” (“Bedroom in an Old City”). She wrote about runaways, solitary people, potential rapists, stupid students—and never kindly. Her early poems read like the Old Testament crossed with fairy tales, while her late style might be best described as existential glam.

Because Tonks eventually renounced poetry, it’s no wonder that her critics would attempt diagnostic readings of the work, scanning the earlier waters for signs of trouble. Tonks’s poems, full of opprobrium and abuse, are only too happy to oblige these interpretive maneuvers: little escapes her caustic caress. The quality of her disgust—mordant, precise, odorous—with its seedy metropolitan locales and roster of disappointing lovers, aligns her with certain earlier modernist writers, equally arch: Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Hope Mirrlees. (Tonks herself claimed Baudelaire and Rimbaud as forebears, and also admitted Colette.) Certain elements of Tonks’s style—her penchant for ellipses, italics, and sardonic exclamation points—can make her look like a crabby grandmother to the Gurlesque poets of a few years back. For all these writers, modernity’s most renewable energy source is the linguistic verve generated by raucous bitterness. But for Tonks, writing in the 1960s, poetic style and culture made for a complex macramé. On the one hand, Tonks would disavow any overt politics for her poetry. The marginal figures in her poems, as well as her own fine sense of the grotesque, were meant to produce cultural effects more than diagnoses of some actually existing world. Disgust flows through her work but not as an emotion that generates, as Sianne Ngai has suggested it might, political commitments or orientations. On the other hand, Tonks’s poetry often vibrates with a kind of theological seriousness. Disgust was her way of registering a fallen world as both cause and effect of the faulty and yet over-sensitized machinery of self. Tonks draws our attention to how language can swell, rot, and bloat, and through such unseemliness register the precarious exchanges between inner and outer, spirit and world.

Astley notes that Tonks felt disconnected from other writers, even as she occasionally hosted Dame Edith Sitwell for lunch. Much is rightly made of Tonks’s exceptional status as one of the few female poets writing in 1960s England, and the only poet writing with such angry flair and sizzling displeasure.

Compared to contemporaries like Elizabeth Jennings, who was associated with the Movement, or to Elaine Feinstein, who belonged to the British Poetry Revival and the Cambridge School, Tonks's work feels fed on a different, more rancid diet altogether. Besides the French and early modernists, Tonks bears some relation to New Apocalypse writers, perhaps especially Dylan Thomas and Lynette Roberts, though the writhing Welsh countrysides of Thomas and Roberts have little to do on the surface with Tonks's abysmal cityscapes and vague Middle Eastern mirages. Tonks was enormously interested, as was Roberts, in terrible words and how they scrape together. Take Tonks's extensive litanies, often in triadic form, where strange assortments conjure acrid humor: "chablis, hocks, moselles" ("Hydromaniac"); "jampots, brothels, paranoias" ("Epoch of the Hotel Corridor"); "clouds of witchcraft, nitro-glycerine, and cake" ("Done for!"); "some cold green diction, banknotes, a penis" ("Students in Bertorelli's"). The energy of these poems depends on unidirectional flow from one to many: what powers them is close observation of others—their habits, their situations, and even their unfortunate cuisines. The odd angles of Tonks's observational approach suggest a kind of shattered expressionism; the poems multiply and proliferate rather than consolidate or confirm any stable conception of experience or event.

As exceptional as this style had been for 1960s British poetry, Tonks herself did not write, when she wrote, in a vacuum. Though some critics have been eager to claim her as an antidote to the Movement and its dominance in this era, Astley relates that Tonks corresponded with Larkin, befriended Movement biographer Robert Conquest, and attended meetings of the Group, a workshop associated with Philip Hobsbaum, Edward Lucie-Smith, and others. Meanwhile, her poems were published in "establishment" journals like the *Observer*, *Encounter*, the *Listener*, and the *Poetry Review* (prior to Eric Mottram's editorship). It's read alongside the poets of the Group that Tonks and her poetry can be best understood. Now nearly forgotten, Group poets, particularly George MacBeth, Peter Redgrove, and Martin Bell, were likewise writing in these years a gaudy, ugly poetry that seethed. Reviewing *The Group Anthology* in 1963, a reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* noted that "the memorable quality of good recent contemporary poetry has been like the quality of fingernails scratching a silk stocking, of a cat's fur stroked the wrong way, of the noise a shovel makes among small coals, of a smoothing plane cutting against, rather than with, the grain of wood. There has been what might be called a 'sick mood,' a certain preoccupation with the ugly, the cruel, the nasty, the poetically grotesque and pathetic, in recent poets."

But there are "sick moods" and there are sick moods. In her two books of poems, Tonks was a far superior poet—awesomely sick, wickedly good—to anyone associated with either the Movement or the Group. For one thing, her ugliness is shot through with vital impropriety, a kind of punk feminism

that subtly interrogates the empires of English poetry: “Meanwhile...I live on...powerful, disobedient” (“Addiction to an Old Mattress”); “And this was an ode shaken from a box of rats” (“Song of the October Wind”); “The English seacoast is more oafish than a ham” (“The Ice-cream Boom Towns”). After all, she wasn’t just scratching but wearing those silk stockings. Tonks’s poems make overtures to a kind of anarcho-feminism, which is to say she’s often (and not surprisingly) theological rather than political—grand, preening, and righteous. Righteousness is an attitude, a way of feeling, above all a mood. To make the mood swell and stick—to make the poems more than merely moody—Tonks thickened her surface, occasionally clotting it. Her later poems rarely go places, preferring to lounge on masterful phrasings and oddly placed verbiage:

I *insist* on vegetating here
In motheaten grandeur. Haven’t I plotted
Like a madman to get here? Well then.

[...]

Kept awake by alcohol and coffee,
Inside her oriental dressing-gown of dust
My soul is always thinking things over, thoroughly.
No wonder my life has grandeur, depth, and crust.

(“Dressing-gown Olympian”)

Another poem, “The Little Cardboard Suitcase,” begins with this metaphoric exposition: “Events pushed me into this corner; / I live in a fixed routine.” Tonks set her poems carefully, using titles to suggest tableaux: “The Solitary’s Bedroom,” “Story of a Hotel Room,” “Gutter Lord,” “The Ice-cream Boom Towns,” “Orpheus in Soho.” In addition to fog/mud, Tonks plays with logics of in/out, mobilizing spaces in which revelation and secrecy are sometimes hard to distinguish. Her best poems play with intimacy, scandal, enervation. They push into odd affective registers while conceptualizing the dynamics of encounter. It wouldn’t be wrong to identify in Tonks a 1960s *flâneuse*, but it would be obvious. In many poems, she’s riffing on Baudelaire, sure, but also Prufrock and Mauberley, all with a kind of curled lip. The stasis that marks so many of Tonks’s poems is debauched and *déclassé*, as opposed to the circular wanderings of Poe’s man of the crowd. Her attention to the banalities of the language (that gloriously awful dust/crust rhyme) as well as its potentials (vegetating!) is astonishing.

What Tonks called poetry’s “autonomous life” happened, in her view, because of its diction: she was preoccupied with the “search for an idiom

which is individual, contemporary and musical,” and felt that there were “really tremendous feelings” going largely ignored in the serviceable but polite poetry of her age. In a review of Adrienne Rich included in *Bedouin of the London Evening*, Tonks wrote that “the soul has its own landscapes.” The volume was *Diving into the Wreck*, and Tonks was criticizing Rich’s refusal to differentiate inner from outer world, or to separate subjective experience from the political subject matter that mid-career Rich was concerned with. For Tonks, subject matter was secondary to her wild sense of scene. While her early poems intimate genres and modes—*bildung*, *märchen*, Bible tale—they can collapse under certain grammatical tics, particularly her fondness for the prepositional phrase. In “Running Away,” a narrative poem of eleven five-to-six line stanzas, we find all of the following:

“silk of childhood,” “brooch of rain,” “wool of heaven,” “storm of fleece,” “citizenship of the backdoor,” “bonnet of the satin-green,” “livery of epaulettes,” “blaze of dews” “brunette of the birdmusic” “squirt of fruit,” “brogue of grunts,” “scabs of winter” and “drop of thunder”

The poem is overstuffed; Tonks’s early work could suffer from the press of too-muchness. Certain poems begin to pound, feel claustrophobic, smell a little antique. *Iliad of Broken Sentences*, on the other hand, is lean and terse, strung together with ellipses and vinegary aperçus: she generates texture through punctuation and syntax as well as lexis. The urge to endlessly quote Tonks’s saucy maxims is strong; they offer as much joy as the poems, which flash obscenely but often in the same formation, a kind of SOS about the delicious badness of life—“the temptation to live!” as one poem, “Rome,” has it. Reviewing Jean Garrigue, Tonks warned, “It is unwise to base a whole method of composition on a talent for phrase-making—that is a stock-in-trade merely.” But surely it’s precisely Tonks’s phrase-making—irreducible, shiny, and strange—that makes her work feel so very vital still.

Hannah Brooks-Motl